

**Populism in Science Fiction Films**

**An Honors Thesis (HONRS 499)**

**by**

**Amanda S. Richardson**

**Advisor: Dr. Wes Gehring**

*Wes D. Gehring*

SpColl  
Thesis  
15  
2489  
.Z4  
2008  
.R53

### Abstract

This paper will explain some of the basic traits of populist comedies. It will explain why populism is so often mixed with other genres, specifically science fiction. Each chapter will then be dedicated to one of three science fiction films, **The Day the Earth Stood Still**, **Star Wars**, and **E.T. The Extra-Terrestrial**. Specific examples and scenes will be cited from each film to show populist traits. The three chapters will help to better explain populism as well as the impact it has had on science fiction.

### Acknowledgements

I would like to thank Dr. Wes Gehring, my thesis advisor, for instilling an interest of genre studies in me. Also for his guidance, time, and expertise donated to help with this paper.

Science fiction belongs to a trio of genres, which also includes horror and fantasy, known as the genres of the fantastic. While these three genres have characteristics separating them, more recently in some instances science fiction and fantasy have become interchangeable. The primary difference between them being fantasy requires faith to be believable, while science fiction has one foot in reality.

Frank Capra is well known as a director of populist films. He may have been the first director to mix populism with a genre of the fantastic. Ever since his film **It's a Wonderful Life**, populism has been present in numerous fantasy movies. However, numerous examples of populist traits may also be found in science fiction films from the 1950s to huge commercial successes of modern day. Three films, **The Day the Earth Stood Still**, **Star Wars**, and **E.T. The Extra-Terrestrial**, will be examined to show the extent of populism's influence on science fiction.

The reason for populist traits in science fiction movies goes beyond the fact that fantasy and science fiction are so often interchangeable. In fact, populist influence may be seen in other genres as well. Ever since World War II the world has been a more cynical place. This cynical world we live in could help to explain why so many writers and directors mix populism with other genres. People turn to movies to find hope in a world that often seems to sometimes offer little hope and even be a little scary. Populism, among other things, stresses family, patriotism, and most importantly the belief that everyone deserves a second chance.

Certain populist traits are present in all of the science fiction movies that will be examined. A vulnerable hero that has a love of people and a father figure will be included. The hero will be on a quest to find themselves but this quest will come second

to unselfish people related accomplishments and he will make a personal sacrifice. The protagonist's quest will parallel Christ's life. In addition there will be a number of other religious references. Populist comedies show that the majority of people are inherently good and that there is an evil minority. The characters in all three films represent this belief. Finally, the idea that everyone deserves a second chance will be illustrated.

Each film will also exhibit other traits that are common in populist comedies. The capable nature of man is a populist theme in **The Day the Earth Stood Still**. The location (Washington D.C.) of **The Day the Earth Stood Still** represents the patriotism often found in populist comedies. **Star Wars** shows that events will repeat themselves, so that we must learn from the past. It also criticizes fascism and shows violence in a tongue-in-cheek manner. **E.T. The Extra-Terrestrial** celebrates home, family, and small-town, rural America, all populist traits. Finally, neither E.T. nor Klaatu are typical science fiction aliens.

## Chapter 1:

### **The Day the Earth Stood Still**

**The Day the Earth Stood Still** was released to theaters in 1951, before the overpowering effect of special effects laced science fiction on the entertainment industry found today, and decades before other examples of science fiction as populist comedies. This movie may be found mixed in sci-fi classics at a video store but it has definite populist elements. This movie has much more of a science fiction feel than **Star Wars** or **E.T. The Extra-Terrestrial**, it's open-ending for example, but it is still full of populist themes and is helpful to study as an early example.

The location of the movie is very significant. Early populist comedies would often take place in Washington D.C. or have political themes because of the strong patriotic beliefs often tied to populism. Klaatu, much like the title character in **Mr. Smith Goes to Washington**, is very interested in touring the monuments and sights of Washington in order to learn about the country's past. He visits Arlington Cemetery, where he tries to teach Bobby that war is not necessary. However more memorable is his visit to the Lincoln Monument, once again reminiscent of Mr. Smith. Klaatu reads the plaque on the statue of Lincoln and states, "That's the kind of man I want to talk to... a great man." Just as Smith's strong patriotism brings him to Lincoln for advice from a great man, Klaatu believes that Lincoln could help him now. These patriotic feelings are repeated at the end of the movie when Klaatu compares the great leaders of his planet, who are wise and have brought peace, to the forefathers of our country.

Klaatu is not a typical science fiction alien. In a sci-fi movie, Klaatu would have been evil and come to Earth to kill or enslave humans. However, he is actually a gentle, very human alien. He comes to his neighbor Earth in “peace and goodwill”. He wants to save all life on Earth by warning humankind of the danger of their violent ways. His planet lives without war and fears that humans will soon master space travel, spreading their aggression. He tries to warn Earth’s leaders that if humans do not change their aggressive behavior, the planet will be “reduced to a burned out cinder”. Even after humans have shot him twice, he delivers this warning to mankind in hopes of saving them.

Klaatu may also be shown to be a populist hero because of the parallels drawn between him and Christ. The most obvious, spelling the comparison out for those in the audience not able to recognize the many connections themselves, is the name he chooses for himself, or perhaps is chosen for him. Klaatu takes a suit from the drycleaners, a suit belonging to a Major Carpenter. His Earth identity becomes Mr. Carpenter. Klaatu chooses the profession of Jesus as his name.

Klaatu informs a representative from the President, upon arriving on Earth, that he speaks all Earth’s languages. He has the ability to communicate to anyone, regardless of his or her nationality, much as Christ. Another parallel between Christ and Klaatu is his many powers. Klaatu declares to Professor Barnhardt, “If Earth doesn’t listen it must be eliminated.” Klaatu holds the god like ability to destroy all of humanity if he chooses. But like Jesus he wants to warn Earth and give mankind a chance to save itself. He first gives a demonstration of his power, “something dramatic but not destructive”. He has the Godlike ability to neutralize all electricity in the world so nothing works. In essence he is

able to stop the world for one half hour to warn man what is to come if they do not fix their destructive ways.

Finally, Klaatu's death and resurrection parallel Jesus' life. Klaatu, like Christ, is willing to give his life to save humanity. Klaatu believes that there is hope of man saving himself. He tells a general early in the film, "I'm not as cynical about Earth's people as you are." He believes that humans will do the right thing and save themselves. His companion Gort retrieves Klaatu's body and carries it to their ship where he is resurrected. It is made certain that Gort is not confused with God however. Miss Benson asks if Gort has the power of life and death. Klaatu looks upwards and responds, "No, that power is reserved for the Spirit Almighty." Klaatu next forgives humans and delivers his warning of the dangers of man's violence to a crowd of scientists. Klaatu does not force humans to give up their destructive ways, he tells the crowd that they must make the decision to save themselves. He leaves Earth people with their gift of freewill, but lets them know that he, like Christ, will be above watching.

The father figure who guides the hero, that is usually present in populist comedies, is unusual in **The Day the Earth Stood Still**. The young Bobby Benson befriends Klaatu and takes him on a tour of Washington. Bobby helps to mold Klaatu's opinion of humans. He teaches Klaatu about the country's past. They exchange stories, Klaatu telling of his planet's amazing inventions and Bobby of America's history and of the goodness of mankind. His child innocence and honesty show Klaatu that Earth is worth saving. If not for Bobby, Klaatu's vision of humanity may have only been negative. His experiences would have been of being shot, held captive, and hunted. Klaatu may have eventually given up on warning Earth.

curiosity, two traits Klaatu respects. Klaatu is also a scientist who has superior intellect and reasoning abilities and is a good character. Reporters are shown as having both good and evil traits. They bring information to people, who otherwise would not know what was happening. However, like many populist comedies, the reporters are shown to be characters to be suspicious of. They report without all the facts and feed the public's fear of Klaatu. Mr. Stevens' has a less savory job. He is an insurance salesman, which is a career that is often regarded with suspicion. Stevens also makes fun of traits of his profession. For example, he tells Miss Benson that a good insurance salesman does not have patience. Mr. Stevens seems to be a good person, though he is a bit suspicious of others, through much of the movie. However, at the end the audience finds that he was only hiding his greed.

Another populist theme present in **The Day the Earth Stood Still** is that everyone will receive a second chance. All life on Earth is receiving a second chance in this movie. Klaatu has come to Earth to tell mankind that they cannot continue in their current path or the world will be destroyed. Countries are suspicious of one another and at war. Klaatu's world does not have a cemetery for war heroes because there is no longer any war. He tells the world how to rid itself of all aggressive behavior because his planet will not tolerate the spread of violence to other planets. Earth is given a chance to look at itself through an outsider's eyes and change their bad ways.

Mankind receiving a second chance helps to illustrate another populist trait, the capable nature of man. Man is believed able to accept and implement reasonable change. Klaatu has to have faith that people will believe what he tells him and accept the idea that they must change their ways. It seems that this will happen because Miss Benson has



## **Chapter 2:**

### **Star Wars**

**Star Wars** has remained a classic film for over 25 years (the original trilogy as well as the prequels are all among the top 25 box office grossing films ever), far longer than the average life span of a typical science fiction movie. This may be due to the fact that it's creator, George Lucas, intended for the movie to actually be a comedy. While **Star Wars** definitely appears to be a science fiction film at first glance, at closer inspection it can be found that the characters, themes, and situations actually exhibit many traits of a populist comedy. These traits can be seen in all of the movies' characters and themes, but especially in the movie's hero, Luke Skywalker, and his teacher, Jedi Master Obi-Wan Kenobi.

Luke Skywalker is, in many ways, a leading example of a populist hero. The hero in movies from this genre is often young and vulnerable. He is a young (only 21 years old when the saga begins) farmboy, who has never left his home planet. He doesn't always seem to know what he is doing, things just happen to fall into place with him. He is impatient, headstrong and sensitive. He has big dreams, but no real way of achieving them. In this trilogy, Luke is on a quest to find his roots, himself, and to understand his past, but his fight against evil, to help free the universe from the Empire, which enslaves it, overshadows this. Luke must often push aside his own feelings and momentarily ignore what he learns to better help the Rebellion's cause. This is another essential trait for a populist hero, self-discovery coming second to the modest, heroic individual and his unselfish, people-related accomplishments.

Luke's great love of people, especially those close to him, is a very admirable trait of a populist hero. In **The Empire Strikes Back**, Luke rushes to Bespin (Cloud City) to help Princess Leia and Han Solo when he "sees" that they are in trouble in a Jedi vision. He leaves his training on Dagobah, even though Yoda warns him it could lead to his death, because his friends lives are more important to him than his own and he would help that at any cost. Luke once again risks his life to help others in **Return of the Jedi**. He gives himself to the Emperor to protect the people on Endor. He would rather sacrifice himself to what seems to be a certain death, than risk the safety of his friends and hundreds of other innocent lives.

Luke proves to be a very capable hero, no matter the doubts that the audience or his friends had (for example, Leia, at first meeting Luke during his rescue of her, comments, "You gotta be kidding." at his young age.) Luke's common sense, or as it is attributed in **Star Wars**, trust in the Force, allows Luke to succeed in what others, more experienced than himself, can not come close to accomplishing. Dozens of trained X-wing pilots try to blow up the Death Star, a giant ship capable of destroying entire planets in seconds, by hitting a tiny target with a missile. Even with their targeting computers and years of training they fail at their mission, many of them losing their lives in the process. However, Luke, who seems to be flying an X-wing for the time in his life, is able to hit the target and destroy the Death Star (and send Darth Vader spinning off into space) without the use of any computer. He merely trusts in the Force and he was able to succeed. The results of Luke's common sense and ability to accomplish great tasks prove he is very capable. But Luke not only can implement great change, he can also accept it, another important characteristic for a populist hero. Luke's world as he knows it is

completely torn apart throughout the movies. He loses his home and family (Aunt Beru and Uncle Owen) early in the trilogy and is later cast in a leadership position and given responsibility that he is unaccustomed to. He also must deal with the facts that his worst enemy is the father that he has always longed for and believed to be a great hero and that the woman he loves is really his sister. He actually accepts these changes quite well and very quickly. At the end of **Return of the Jedi**, he stares forlornly at the sky and burns his father's (Darth Vader's armor) remains. Then after saying his goodbyes (to his father and his past) he joins the party with his Leia, who is in love with Han. If Luke can accept such a dramatic transformation in his life in such a way, it seems he could accept any change that he should face.

Obi-Wan Kenobi serves an important role to Luke's development, that of an older fatherly figure and teacher. Kenobi is the only connection to his father. Kenobi was once Luke's father's teacher and they fought together as Jedi before Anakin Skywalker turned to the dark side and became Darth Vader. However, Kenobi does not tell Luke everything about his father, he allows Luke to believe that Darth Vader killed his father to protect him from the truth. By keeping the truth from Luke he is able to protect him in two ways; Luke is able to idealize his father and believe he lived and died in honor, and Kenobi knew that if Luke knew his father was alive he would hunt for him and try to save him. Kenobi's desire to protect Luke at all costs is very parent-like. Kenobi is also very wise and seems to know all, and teaches Luke the ways of the Force. Even after his death, Kenobi continues to give Luke advice in times of danger. In this way Kenobi's life force remains a part of Luke like a parent, and his lessons continue to be a part of Luke's life like a parent's values. Kenobi also makes many personal sacrifices for Luke,

which is very parent-like, but also a trait of a populist character. Before **A New Hope** (the first **Star Wars** installment) even begins, he has already made a great sacrifice for Luke. Kenobi becomes a hermit on Tatooine after he takes Luke from his father. He knew that Luke would be turned to the dark side or killed if he allowed Darth Vader to have Luke, so while Luke was a baby he took him and brought him to Tatooine, a place so small and on the outskirts of the universe that Vader would never find him. Then to be sure Luke is never found or harmed while his surrogate aunt and uncle raise him, Kenobi becomes a hermit on the desert planet so he can remain near. Kenobi later makes the ultimate sacrifice for Luke when he gives his life in a lightsaber battle, so Luke and his friends can escape from the deck of the Death Star on the Millennium Falcon. This is the supreme sacrifice that Kenobi could make for Luke.

Kenobi's willingness to make personal sacrifice for others demonstrates that he shares Luke's love of people. As a Jedi, Kenobi is very sensitive to the feelings and suffering of others, a trait that Luke would too possess later in the trilogy. When Darth Vader and Admiral Tarkin use the laser aboard the death star to destroy Alderaan, Kenobi stops in agony aboard the Millennium Falcon, which is light-years from the destroyed planet. He can actually feel the loss of the people's lives on the planet through the Force. He senses the sudden loss of life, which causes a disturbance in the Force. He is greatly saddened by this loss and takes it as a personal loss, even though he had never met many of these people.

In many populist comedies there is a parallel between the protagonist and Christ, and **Star Wars** is no exception. All of the Jedi in the movies are rather God-like. They can all control other people's minds. In **Return of the Jedi**, Luke convinces one of

Jabba the Hut's servants to let him into his palace. Darth Vader (even though he is the antagonist in the movies, he possesses the same powers as the other Jedi) is able to choke an Imperial guard and take Han's gun from him using only his mind. Obi-Wan Kenobi and Luke's second teacher Yoda are both portrayed very Christ-like. They are both very powerful, but they prefer not to use this great power. They prefer peace to violence.

In the movie "good" Jedi are said to be of the light side of the Force, while the "evil" Jedi are of the dark side. It seems that perhaps the light side of the force was meant to represent Heaven and God, while the dark side represents Hell and Satan. Even the clothes that the characters wear seem to support this theory. Darth Vader is dressed entirely in black, and his uniform is very demon like. Emperor Palpatine (who is also a dark Jedi) is very deformed and demon like as well. On the other hand, Luke, Obi-Wan, and Yoda wear white and other light colors.

The Jedi long for no material possessions, much like Christ. Obi-Wan sacrifices his life to save Luke, much as Christ gave his life to relieve people of their sins. But the greatest parallel to Christ is that Obi-wan and Yoda are "resurrected" after their deaths. Their bodies fade away when they die and their spirits are shown to continue "to live". Obi-Wan's spirit advises Luke on how and when to use the Force when he is in danger. Yoda and Anakin Skywalker's (Darth Vader once he has returned to the light side) spirits are also seen after their deaths in the final scene of *Return of the Jedi*.

Life in **Star Wars** springs from and is ruled by a mysterious presence known as the Force. Populist comedies often accent the religious. While Christianity beliefs are usually expressed, in **Star Wars'** case the Force originates from Taoism, an ancient Chinese religion. In **A New Hope**, Obi-Wan Kenobi explains, "The Force is what gives

the Jedi his power. It's an energy field created by all living things. It surrounds us and penetrates us. It binds the galaxy together." Kenobi's speech is similar to what Taoism is perceived to be. According to Anne Collins Smith, an avid **Star Wars** fan and Tao teacher, "The Tao is kind of, well a force that pervades the universe, it is the source of the universe, but it also IS the universe." (Chang). The ancient Chinese believed the way to lead your life is to get your personal Tao in touch with the Tao of the entire universe (Chang). Kenobi once again parallels this philosophy when he tells Luke, "Be one with the force Luke." Taoism and **Star Wars** are also similar in the way they deal with intervention in nature,

To the Taoist, any *deliberate* intervention in the natural order of things will eventually turn into the opposite of what was intended and result in failure. And that is a common theme in **Star Wars**, says Smith. Take the scene from the first **Star Wars** movie, where Obi-wan Kenobi is teaching Luke Skywalker the "ways of the Force" on Han Solo's Millennium Falcon. Luke is trying hard to avoid laser blasts from a remote, but fails miserably. When Obi-wan Kenobi places a blaster helmet on his head so he can't see, he easily deflects the remote's laser blasts. And remember the last battle scene when Luke blows up the Death Star? Several deliberate attempts by the Rebels, using a targeting computer, end in failure. But when Luke, once again listens to Obi-wan Kenobi to "use the Force", he turns off the device and takes a successful shot. "That's really Taoist," says Smith.<sup>1</sup>

In an ancient poem, Tao is described as "a bellows: it is empty yet infinitely capable.

The more you use it, the more it produces; The more you talk of it, the less you understand it."<sup>1</sup> Doing rather than trying is echoed when Yoda tells Luke, "Try not. Do or do not, there is no try." The final way that **Star Wars** is similar to Taoism is that the Force is expressed as two opposites, dark vs. light, which is equivalent to the yin yang symbol. In the Tao religion the two sides are inseparable, just as the both the light and dark sides of the Force are present in the Jedi. The light and dark are in everyone, each

person must chose which path to follow. When Luke enters a cave and faces his dark side on Dagobah, he sees the dark within himself and chooses to follow the light.

The ideas that there is good in everyone and it only needs to be brought out and that everyone will one day have a second chance are two populist themes found in **Star Wars**. The first of these themes is easily demonstrated because good wins over the opposition, which proves that people are inherently good. Luke never gives up hope that there is good in his father (Darth Vader) and he is convinced that he can bring it out, even if it means sacrificing his own life to give his father a second chance. At the end of **Return of the Jedi**, Vader returns to the light side of the Force and turns against his master (he pushes Emperor Palpatine to his death to save Luke). He then tells Luke to leave him behind on the doomed second Death Star, so Luke will have time to escape safely. Vader returns to the good, caring man he once was (Anakin Skywalker) and is finally, for a moment, the father Luke dreamed of. This is a perfect example to show the populist belief that there is good in everyone, because there is good even in the ultimate villain. This is also a prime example of everyone receiving a second chance. Vader has killed millions and seems to be completely evil, but even he is given a second chance to turn to the light side and be a father.

Numerous other characters in the movies are also given a second chance to live their lives better. Leia is very cold, looks down upon others, and seems to be a stereotypical stuck-up princess in **A New Hope**, a condition that only seems to worsen when her home-planet is destroyed. Through her love for Han, friendship with Luke and Chewie, and her adventures with the Rebellion, she is able to become more understanding and friendly. Her exact moment of realization seems to be just as Han is

to be frozen in carbonite in **The Empire Strikes Back**. She declares her love for Han and begins to cry. At this moment the Princess's cold shell melts and she seems vulnerable, she has admitted that she can love another and that another affects her. By the end of the trilogy, she sees others as her equals, she is able to socialize with the "common" people and have fun, looks at people for who they really are, and is far less cold. Princess Leia is a far more likeable, "human" character in **Return of the Jedi**.

Han Solo also is a far different person by the end of the trilogy. In **A New Hope**, he is a smuggler, who cares about no one except himself, and has faith in nothing but his own abilities. However, because of Leia's love and his new found friends and respect from others, he is able to become a "respectable" citizen, who is willing to give himself to others. He also finds that there are things worth believing in and fighting for, such as his friends, love, and freedom. Han's moment of change can be pinpointed at one scene. In **A New Hope**, Han collects his reward for saving Leia and flies off in the Millennium Falcon, saying that he was just in it for the money. Leia returns with, "If money is all you care for Captain Solo, then money is what you'll get." Han thinks of these words when he hears over his ship's communicator that Luke is the last pilot left to bomb the Death Star. He becomes concerned about his new friend and decides that he has to return to help him. When Han risks his life to help Luke destroy the Death Star, he becomes an enemy of the Empire, and finally does something totally unselfish.

Han's friend Lando Calrissian also is given a second chance to change his crooked ways and become a real friend. Lando betrays Han's trust when he turns Han, Leia, and Chewie over to Vader for a reward. He later feels guilty about this decision



and helps to rescue Han from Jabba the Hut. He then joins the Rebellion and is instrumental in destroying the second Death Star.

**Star Wars** criticizes fascism through the Empire. Emperor Palpatine is very much a dictator. He, with the assistance of a few high-ranking officers (Darth Vader being his right-hand man), rules the entire universe. Luke and the Rebellion are trying to defeat the Empire and crush fascist control. **Star Wars'** criticism of fascism defends populism against skeptics. While populism is seen by most as pure, some see it as having a too controlling and powerful demi-god hero. At the end of **A New Hope**, Leia presents Luke and Han with medals as the rebel troops watch on. This scene strikes a remarkable resemblance to the Nazi film **Triumph of the Will**, which presents Hitler as a demi-god. While George Lucas may appear to have been making Leia appear as a Hitler-like dictator and Luke and Han as top fascist heroes, he was in reality showing his heroes to be quite the opposite. The next time the audience sees these characters is in the opening of **The Empire Strikes Back**. All three are on the frozen planet Hoth, "back in the trenches" fighting in harsh conditions. Leia and even the very powerful Luke are far from being controlling and take orders from others to act as a part of the team. Luke is also shown to be vulnerable both physically (losing his right hand in a fight) and emotionally (he nearly loses his life trying to save his father, Vader), characteristics that would not fit with a god-like character. Lucas' portrayal of these characters as noble, humble, vulnerable, team players puts to rest any criticism that some may have against a pure populism genre.

The world of a populist comedy is very rational and one way that this is shown is that events will repeat themselves and be quite predictable. A populist hero must keep

track of past experiences for success. This is demonstrated in **Star Wars** by its' "the student becomes the teacher" theme. It is known, that before the movies happened, Darth Vader (as Anakin Skywalker) betrayed Kenobi to go to the dark side and serve Emperor Palpatine. He then betrays his new master (Emperor Palpatine) to return to the light side and his son. Emperor Palpatine foresaw these events in a Jedi vision, but believed that he could change the outcome by making Vader watch Luke die. He ignores this cycle of events, which leads to his defeat. This theory that events will repeat themselves and be quite predictable is not entirely true for the trilogy however. Yoda initially does not want to train Luke because he is too much like his father was. He says that Luke is too young, brash, and impulsive; the same traits that led to his father's turning to the dark side. This cycle does not repeat itself though, Luke is able to look into the face of the dark side (three times in fact) and turn away.

One of cinema's leading "sci-fi" films, **Star Wars**, at closer inspection has proven itself to be not a science fiction movie, but rather a populist comedy. George Lucas's concept the Force and basic situations alone may be enough to sway a viewer to believe this, but the characters in the trilogy prove beyond a doubt that **Star Wars** is a comedy. Luke Skywalker exhibits nearly all traits a typical populist hero, and Obi-Wan Kenobi is a prime example of a populist role-model/father figure.

---

<sup>1</sup> Chan, Gloria. "Realities Beyond the Myth: The Tao of Star Wars".  
<http://www.exn.ca/starwars/taoism.cfm>

## Chapter 3:

### **E.T. The Extra-Terrestrial**

Steven Spielberg's **E.T. The Extra-Terrestrial** is regarded by many as a classic science fiction film. However, Spielberg never really intended this to be. This is evident by the film's original title, *A Boy's Life*. He was writing a film about a boy growing up; a coming of age story that he hoped would be "a journey of pure escape"<sup>1</sup> for his audience. **E.T.** would more accurately be characterized as a populist comedy with fantasy overtones (a high suspension of belief is required).

Like Klaatu, E.T. is not a typical science fiction alien. If life exists elsewhere in the universe, science fiction film usually portrays aliens as evil. However, E.T. and his kind come to Earth to explore and learn. They have great healing powers, which E.T. uses to heal mankind as well as dying plants. E.T. is a kind, sympathetic, very human alien. E.T. is also a bit more realistic than actions portrayed in some science fiction. A boy asks why E.T. can't just beam up to his ship. Elliott responds, "This is reality." E.T. is not as outrageous as to resort to "beaming" as in **Star Trek**.

The hero of the movie is a young boy discovering himself. However he puts his own discovery second to helping others. Elliott first tries to protect E.T. by keeping him a secret and later tries to save his life by helping him get home. While these are Elliott's goals, in the process he learns about himself and grows up. E.T. takes on the role of the "father figure" in populist comedies. Elliott's brother exclaims at the beginning of the movie, "Why don't you grow up, think how other people feel for a change." Elliott and E.T. form a psychic bond, which forces Elliott to feel what E.T. does and to grow from

his experiences. Elliott is able to really feel how someone else does. In the beginning of the movie, E.T. is confined to a room with the dog he is scared of waiting for him outside. Children are like E.T. their world is small; it consists of their home and what parents allow them to see. The outside may be very scary, but eventually children learn more and their world expands. By trying to make E.T. understand Earth, Elliott discovers a lot about himself and his surroundings and is able to grow. The “bad guys” in the movie represent authority figures that children fear. Teachers, police, and doctors are often scary to young children. The scientists are also dressed in dark clothes and later wear helmets, which would be frightening or even confusing to children.

E.T. takes Elliott through important life moments and helps him to become independent and responsible. E.T., in a matter of days, takes Elliott through a number of experiences that many children encounter over years of development. Elliott gets drunk at school as E.T. drinks a refrigerator of beer at home. Elliott presumably has his first experience with alcohol, gets drunk, and learns of alcohol's danger. This is similar to many teenagers experimenting with alcohol and getting sick before they learn their limits. In protecting E.T., Elliott learns responsibility. He stands up against the scientists claiming, “He came to me.” He later “steals” E.T. to save him because he feels responsible for him. He must learn to be responsible for someone else much quicker than most children. Elliott also gains independence. He must learn to take a leadership position within his family and leave the safety of his mother to return E.T. to his ship. Elliott must face the death of someone he cares about. E.T.'s death makes him feel the sense of loss that comes with death. The first time a loved one dies, can alter the perspective of a young person. Elliott weeping says, “He must be dead because I don't

know how to feel. I can't feel anything anymore." After Elliott finds E.T. is alive and brings him to his ship, he must let him go and say goodbye. Elliott actually learns two lessons in one. He must find away to let E.T. go, but E.T. also tells him that he is not totally leaving him. "I'll be right here," he tells Elliott and points to Elliott's head. He learns just because a friend leaves doesn't mean that they haven't left an impression on your life and memories. Even Elliott seems to realize the impact that E.T. has had in his life. He begs E.T. to stay pleading, "We could grow up together."

The majority of the characters in E.T. are good, and the evil minority is easily identifiable. The story centers on E.T. and Elliott's family, all of who are good. The family unites together to protect E.T. and supports one another. E.T. has one noble goal to return home. In the process he helps Elliott and heals plants as well as Elliott's injured finger. The evil characters are easy to identify. As discussed many of them are authority figures that a child may fear. Dark music preceded the bad characters entrances and follows them. They are also easy to identify visually. The face of the scientist searching for E.T. throughout the movie is not shown until near the end of the film. The camera is always centered on the keys attached to his belt, perhaps a child's eye view of him. This makes him seem more mysterious and sinister. He spies on Elliott's family from a black van (historically the color of the bad guy) and waits in the darkness to search their house. Later, when the house is put into quarantine, NASA officials and doctors are dressed in space and contamination suits. The audience cannot see their faces, which makes them much scarier, especially to a child.

The "key man" helps to show another populist trait. Populist films suggest that there is good in everyone. After E.T.'s death the key man removes his mask, and finally

he seems human. He is very sympathetic to Elliott. He stands by and watches E.T. leave Earth on his ship. In the end he does what is right, and allows E.T. to escape.

Home, family, and small town, rural America are often celebrated in populist comedies. E.T. is obsessed with home. He invents a machine to contact his home planet, and often repeats, "E.T. phone home." E.T. wants to return home so badly because he misses his family. He sadly watches Elliott's mom read to Gert and brings Elliott to listen with him. E.T. can sense when his family are near in their ship and is brought back to life when he knows this. Family also plays an important role in Elliott's life. The family has problems because Elliott's father left them. Elliott and his brother, Michael, have troubles because of his absence. They reminisce about ball games they went to with him. The kids all make fun of each other, call each other names, and fight with each other. Their mother also has trouble dealing with the children without him. However, this family loves each other and functions without the father. E.T. helps to bring the family closer together. The children have to get along and work together to keep E.T. a secret. Michael sticks up for his brother when other boys make fun of him about E.T., when earlier in the movie he would encourage it. Small town, rural America is also celebrated in E.T. Elliott's family lives on the outskirts of town, where children are able to play in the streets on Halloween. Rural America is hinted at again when Elliott first sees E.T. Elliott walks just past their yard and enters a cornfield where he sees E.T. Finally, there is a return to wilderness as the movie both begins and ends in the forest near Elliott's home.

Many populist comedies have Christian references. In this film, there are parallels between E.T. and Christ. E.T. is able to heal plants and people with his touch.

Further Christ's sacrifice and resurrection are paralleled in **E.T.** E.T. and Elliott are both very ill and being monitored. Their brain waves match one another, but suddenly separate. E.T. begins to die, as Elliott gets better. E.T. sacrifices his own life to save Elliott. He has made the ultimate personal sacrifice (another populist trait) to save another. E.T. is then "resurrected" as he begins talking from his freezing chamber. E.T. is then brought to his ship, which seems to be a heavenly vessel. E.T. walks into a tunnel of light aboard his ship. It is reminiscent of the tunnel of light symbolic to crossing into heaven after death. It looks as if E.T. returning home may be his ascent into heaven.

**E.T. The Extra-Terrestrial**, more appropriately originally titled *A Boy's Life*, at closer inspection has been shown to exhibit many populist traits. This coming of age story has a young, vulnerable populist hero and a slightly unusual guiding figure to serve as a "father" figure. The majority of the characters are good, the movie only contains an obvious evil minority, and it proves that there is good in everyone. As with many populist comedies, home, family, and rural America are celebrated. Finally, the parallels between E.T. and Christ make this movie a populist comedy far easier than a typical science fiction film.

---

<sup>1</sup> Spielberg, Steven. "E.T. The Extra-Terrestrial: 20<sup>th</sup> Edition." Disc 1. 2002. Amblin Entertainment.